

The effectiveness of group dynamics in English language classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In English language classrooms, the most notable aspect would be the fact that the majority of students remain silent during the lesson. Only a few bolder students would speak up and ask questions to clarify something they do not understand. English language in Sri Lanka could be considered to be either our second or sometimes foreign language. Hence, students have varied problems and challenges with the language in the classroom. With English being introduced as the medium of instruction at higher education institutions, the demand for the language is ever increasing. Students who come from rural areas of the country and those who have had very little exposure to the language find this very challenging. Hence they are afraid to use the language in their classrooms, fearing they would be laughed at or reprimanded if errors are made. These preconceived notions have thus inhibited students from speaking in English which is mandatory for their higher studies and employment. A novel method of using group work in language classrooms has become a very effective way of getting students to communicate. Commonly known as Collaborative learning, this method has encouraged more and more language teachers to incorporate group activities into their lessons as there are more positive benefits than negative aspects to language learning. Although there may be some disadvantages to this teaching method, it has proven to be one of the most beneficial ways for students to master language.

Key words

Collaborative Learning, English as a Second Language, English as a Foreign Language, Group work

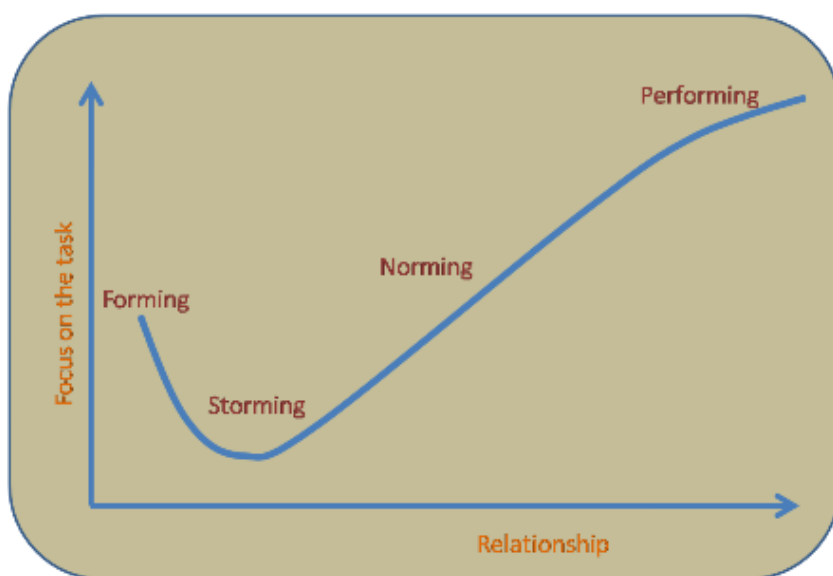
Collaborative learning has become an important part of classroom teaching. Though there are both advantages and disadvantages in such activities, they have proven to be more effective in language classrooms.

Students aspiring to improve their English language abilities are of varied ages and professions. Some are school leavers while others are either following higher studies or are employed either in the private or the government sector. When they find themselves suddenly mixed with such individuals in class, almost all the students experience a sense of shyness, fright, and complexities. As a result, it becomes the task of the teacher to see that these students bond together in order to carry out the lessons effectively. For a majority of these students, group activities are alien as they have not had student centered teaching during their school education.

From time immemorial teachers, have dominated the classroom using traditional teaching methods, where students were required only to listen to the teacher while taking down notes if needed. This form of teaching results in learners becoming passive as it requires minimal student

participation (Gibbs and Habeshaw 1989). At the end of such lessons, students usually remember only about ten percent of the lesson that was taught. Though this has been the practice over the years, currently this trend has shifted to more student-centered classroom teaching as this promotes active learning among students.

Group activities involve many aspects such as types of groups, types of group activities, preparing students for group work, laying down implicit ground rules and the teacher's role in cooperative learning. As Tuckman's (1965) theory suggests, teamwork has to have four stages that he describes as "forming", "storming", "norming" and "performing". Forming occurs as the initial step where groups are formed. During the second step, or storming, group members start seeing themselves as part of a team or group, but they may challenge each other as "conflict and confrontation typify this stage, as differences surface". As a result, their performance as a group may decrease. The third step, norming, is where all the team/group members "come together, developing processes, establishing ground rules, clarifying who does what and how things will be done". This phase brings out a sense of togetherness among the members. The final step, performing, shows "increased focus on both the task, and on team relationships, combine to provide synergy". At this stage all members work together very effectively. The diagram below illustrates the four stages of teamwork.



The 4 Phases of Tuckman's Teamwork Theory

Fisher and Ellis (1990) emphasize the fact that the sharing element is the key factor in group work. This can come in the form of perceptions, motivation, or goals, as well as around tasks. This sharing element can be greatly influenced by the 'group dynamic' or the 'climate' of the group. This also involves a high degree of interaction among members which definitely helps students in peer learning, to build upon each other's contributions and to thereby gain confidence. Students are also able to apply knowledge and solve problems, engage in critical thinking, and develop positive attitudes.

Just as there are many advantages, students face a number of difficulties when engaging in group activities. Some of them are organizing, team members not contributing, free-riding, and not trusting each other (Burdett 2003; Whatley, Staniford, Beer, & Scown, 1999). The most negative aspect in group activity is the fact that some students lack the confidence to speak and contribute as a result of their lack of fluency in English. Here the teacher can play a part in helping teams to overcome problems (Ruel & Bastiaans, 2003). These problems can be overcome by using effective project management techniques, generating team cohesion, encouraging students who are less proficient in the English language, and laying down ground rules at the start of an activity which showcase effective project management (McAlister, 2006). Ground rules, or norms, are protocols for acceptable behavior within a team and may comprise task related rules as well as social rules (Patterson, Carron, & Loughhead, 2005).

As collaborative learning has proven to be more effective in language classrooms, it can be concluded that even though there are a few difficulties in this regard, this method certainly is beneficial to students who follow English language classes as a means of reducing their fright of and inhibitions towards using the language.

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